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A Summer Wildfire:

**How the greatest debut in baseball history peaked and dwindled
over the course of three months**

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A Summer Wildfire:

**How the greatest debut in baseball history peaked and dwindled
over the course of three months**

by

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Report

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To my parents, Lyn & Terry, without whom, none of this would be possible.

Thank you.

A Summer Wildfire:

How the greatest debut in baseball history peaked and dwindled over the course of three months

by

Colin Thomas Reynolds, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

SUPERVISORS: Tracy Dahlby & Bill Minutaglio

The narrative itself is an ageless one, a fundamental Shakespearean tragedy in its progression. A young man is deemed invaluable and exalted by the public. The hero is cast into the spotlight and bestowed with insurmountable expectations. But the acclamations and pressures are burdensome and the invented savior fails to fulfill the prospects once imagined by the public. He is cast aside, disregarded as a symbol of failure or one deserving of pity. It's the quintessential tragedy of a fallen hero.

The protagonist of this report is Washington Nationals pitcher Stephen Strasburg, who enjoyed a phenomenal rookie season before it ended abruptly due to a severe elbow injury. But from a broader perspective, this report considers the current state of baseball in American society. The immense anticipation of Strasburg's debut in early June of 2010 was unprecedented and his success sparked the public's interest. But the 21-year-old failed to seize our adoration and his injury left many disappointed and disengaged. During a time when the casual baseball fan was disinterested and even the devoted felt disenchanting, Strasburg provided a brief reprieve from the

controversies and allegations. Americans could connect with their beleaguered National Pastime once more.

Although Strasburg is the driving force, his role as “savior” could have been bestowed upon anyone. Nothing about his personality or looks or charisma garnered him such high esteem, but just his uncanny ability to throw a baseball. On the surface he is just a young prodigy in a long line of highly touted successes and failures – and he certainly won’t be the last. In essence, the star alone does not compose the story, but rather it’s the ideology surrounding him.

Lastly, Strasburg’s narrative is still unfinished. As in any tragic tale comes the hope of redemption. This unknown conclusion is fitting for a baseball narrative where every year begins afresh and endless possibilities emerge. As essayist Alexander Pope once noted, “Hope springs eternal in the human breast.” The same is true in baseball.

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“No youngster that has broken into fast company in recent years is attracting as much attention ... the baseball world will watch his debut into fast company with a great deal of interest.”

- J. Ed Gallo reporting on future Hall of Fame pitcher Walter Johnson,
The Washington Post, July 1907

It was warm and clear in St. Louis the night Mark McGwire broke the single season home run record – Tuesday, September 8, 1998. The monumental home run chase between the Cardinals’ slugger and Chicago Cubs rival Sammy Sosa, a one-on-one battle that captured the nation’s attention all summer long, finally culminated with a powerful flick of the wrist and a low-driven baseball that sailed 341 feet, barely clearing the left field wall of Busch Memorial Stadium – number 62 for McGwire. Thirty-seven years after New York Yankees right fielder Roger Maris received death-threats for breaking Babe Ruth’s coveted mark, Mark McGwire had eclipsed him as the new single-season king. America had a new hero.

Sports Illustrated deemed the mark “the most mythologized, most revered and most American of sporting records.” The home run was a metaphor for America – “appealing to its roots of rugged individualism and its fascination with grand scale.”

Just a few years earlier, before McGwire and Sosa rekindled America’s affection for its pastime, baseball was reeling. The sport had yet to recover from its 1994 season which ended abruptly in August due to a player’s strike. The World Series of 1997 flirted with record lows for television ratings and only eight teams had equaled their attendance figures they posted from before the 1994-95 season. By the end of 1998, however, baseball had regained its national audience. Attendance was up across the country and FOX television ratings increased 11 percent. Major

League Baseball estimated a financial boost of \$1.5 billion from the home run race between McGwire and Sosa. According to a *New York Times* article written about the '98 season, Cincinnati Reds manager Jack McKeon once instructed his pitchers not to intentionally walk McGwire – for the sake of "healing the nation." Baseball was back and Americans cared once again.

On that fateful Tuesday night, a 10-year-old, Stephen James Strasburg, sat with his large blue-eyes opened wide, gazing at the television screen in his San Diego suburb. He, like almost all of America, tuned in to the national broadcast to witness history. The chubby kid with the short blonde hair watched with anticipation as McGwire stepped to the plate in the first inning against Cubs pitcher Steve Trachsel. The young fan slunk low in disappointment as Trachsel induced a 3-0 groundout to the shortstop, temporarily delaying the Cubs pitcher's unfortunate place in baseball lore. Then in the fourth inning, with two outs and no runners on base, Trachsel delivered an 88 mph sinking fastball to McGwire, hoping to fool the red-headed giant. The pitcher failed and America – as well as Strasburg – rejoiced over its home run hitting deity.

Just over 10 years later, McGwire would be all but exiled from the sport, accused of using performance-enhancing supplements including Human Growth Hormone and illegal steroids. In fact, most of this generation's baseball stars would be implemented in steroid scandal and controversy. They would be considered cheaters. Records that were broken – some demolished – during this decade were tarnished to say the least, complete shams to be blunt. Baseball's reputation was once again in shambles, suffering from its own feigned ignorance at the transgressions of some of the sport's biggest stars, including McGwire and Sosa. Major League Baseball had plans to market a new generation of young stars, hoping they would supplant the indiscretions of previous players and lead the sport into a new golden age. This evolution was vital for the sport to save itself

from its past self. And one of the young superstars that would help improve the state of baseball was that little kid from San Diego – who had grown up to be a widely heralded and immensely talented, 20-year-old pitching phenom. Coming out of college, Stephen Strasburg had an array of pitches; a triple-digit fastball, a curveball that dropped like it was falling off a table, and a changeup clocked at 89 mph – the speed of some major league fastballs. He had recorded a 23-strikeout game and his legend was ballooning. Rumor had it that his fastball once obliterated a Wilson catcher's mitt, shredding the protective webbing made of steerhide. The tattered piece of catching equipment became a thing of folklore, evidence of a great myth.

In his final collegiate home start for the San Diego State Aztecs, Strasburg bolstered his celebrity by throwing a no-hitter in a 5-0 victory over Air Force. He had 17 strikeouts in front of the largest crowd in the history of Tony Gwynn Stadium. He faced just 28 batters that night – only one more than minimum. Highlights from the game, compounded into a 4-minute Youtube video, gained nearly 100,000 views. He finished his junior season 13-1 with a 1.32 ERA. In the 109 innings he pitched, Strasburg allowed just 59 hits, only 16 earned runs, and tallied an astonishing 195 strikeouts. He would leave school after only three years to enter Major League Baseball's annual draft to which ESPN proclaimed, "Not since LeBron James' arrival in the NBA, has one player garnered so much hype." The buildup surrounding the Californian was unprecedented. One professional scout told *ESPN The Magazine*, "This is my 36th draft and I've never seen anything like this." A different scout professed to *Sports Illustrated*, "He doesn't need the minor leagues. He's ready for the major right now." And still another added, "This is something you have to see to believe."

Slowly emerging from its lowest era in history, the sport was in dire need of a cultural resurrection and Stephen Strasburg was the anointed savior. *Washington Post* reporter Adam Kilgore called him “baseball’s most scintillating attraction.” His powerful arm garnered him a record-smashing contract – \$15.1 million from the Washington Nationals – before even throwing his first pitch in the Majors. After drafting its new ace, the team’s 2010 marketing campaign included the slogan: BE THERE WHEN THE LEGEND GROWS. For Strasburg’s debut on June 8, Nationals Park sold over 2,000 standing room only tickets at \$10 apiece and opened 400 additional grandstand seats for his already adoring fans.

So much was riding on the young man and his right arm despite the fact that his only remarkable quality was his ability to throw a round ball at a high speed. Strasburg’s unique talents allowed baseball fans to embrace the previously unimaginable, as if the future of the sport was dependent on his success. Yet his remarkable performances allowed for such an excitement, a sort of justifiable delusion. “Strasburg is all the rage, and with reason,” minor league expert John Sickels warned, “but keep in mind being ‘a polished college pitcher with great stuff and great command’ doesn’t mean you will be a great pro. It certainly helps load the odds in your favor, but you still have to throw the dice.” Strasburg was still just a mortal human, only celebrated like a god. Could anyone handle such a spotlight?

Nothing is more American than exalting a baseball star beyond reason.

July 27, 2010: Clubhouse, Nationals Park – 4:00 p.m.

Just outside of Nationals Park along Potomac Avenue, the late-day sun, blistering the city with 98 degree heat, glistens in a beautiful reflection on the Anacostia River, as if dancing atop its surface. Street vendors are setting up T-shirt stands and program booths up and down S. Capitol and N Street. Inside the new park, a cathedral for baseball, countless kegs of Budweiser are tapped by event staff while grills are fired up and hot dogs are prepared. The Nationals will take the field against the Atlanta Braves in a few hours and the whole neighborhood is abuzz.

In the vaults of the stadium, the Nationals players ready themselves in their plush clubhouse, furnished with brown leather couches and large television sets mounted on the walls. Stephen Strasburg sits alone in his locker with his head angled downward, eyes unmoving, fixated on a far-off spot of the blue and red carpet. A silver Bose headset rests on top of his blonde crew-cut with large, rounded speakers obscuring his pointed ears – successfully blocking out all external sound, just as advertised. He's unmoving, offering no indication of what he may be listening to; no head nod, no toe-tap, no air-guitar.

It's one of baseball's unwritten rules – and the sport has plenty – that a pitcher remains unbothered, deliberately left alone before a start and those in the locker room generally abide. Some famous hurlers (like Atlanta Braves legend John Smoltz) have historically hated this superstition-based solitude, but Strasburg doesn't seem to mind his few moments of privacy. The gaggle of journalists waiting to talk to him, nearly 30 in all, must hold off until post-game for the opportunity. Instead, the writers and the television reporters take this time to interview his teammates with questions that usually circle back to the rookie phenom. But the 21-year-old Strasburg just sits, stoic and patient. It's only a couple hours before he is scheduled to pitch against the Atlanta Braves and he is seemingly focused, undeterred by the early game-day fluttering going on around him.

Baseball in Washington D.C. has almost been an afterthought in recent years. The city, well anchored by politics and Redskins football, has seemingly little time or affection for much else. “Nothing in this city tops the Redskins,” said *Washington Post* sports blogger, Dan Steinberg. “As a sports city, it’s very much one-sided. Even when the other teams have games that get really good ratings, it’s merely a percentage of what the ‘Skins get.”

The city’s other professional clubs – the Wizards, Capitals, United, and Mystics – can occasionally capture the attention of the fan base but rarely can they sustain longevity – and interest never rivals support like for the ‘Skins. For example, in 2005, the year that baseball’s Montreal Expos relocated to Washington, the Redskins averaged nearly 88,000 patrons for every home game at FedEx Field, a stadium that seats 91,704 – the largest venue in the NFL. That same year, the Wizards averaged 17,196 a night at the downtown Verizon Center, and the Capitals got just 13,905. These marks put the Redskins first in the NFL in attendance. The Wizards and the Caps ranked 14th and 28th in the NBA and NHL respectively.

When the Expos moved to Washington and became the Nationals, it marked the first time that professional baseball was played in the nation’s capital since the defunct Senators last played in 1971. There was a brief honeymoon period for the team and for baseball. Fans bought jerseys of aging free agents like Vinny Castilla and Jose Guillen. Unremarkable players like Brad Wilkerson and Chad Cordero were marketed as stars. The team made its home debut – a 5-3 win against the Arizona Diamondbacks – at R.F.K. Stadium on April 14. The Redskins field for 35 years, R.F.K. was converted for baseball and 45,596 fans, including Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig, crammed

into its aging facilities. President George W. Bush threw out the ceremonial first pitch, 95 years after William Taft began the tradition at the old Griffith Stadium.

The city was relatively excited for baseball. But soon enthusiasm turned to indifference. The team was just sort of...there. New Nationals Park was a charming stadium tucked away in the historic but faded neighborhood of Anacostia. The largely African American community, once a haven for arts and nightlife, had fallen on hard times since being infected by widespread drug use in the 1980s. A rising crime rate, associated with drug trade, soared into the 1990s. In 2005 alone, 62 of the 195 homicides in Washington D.C. occurred in Southeast's 7th District which includes Anacostia and its surrounding neighborhoods – Barry Farm, Naylor Gardens and Washington Highlands. But the new ballpark brought hope. The prideful community had won the right to host the team by outbidding Ashburn, Virginia, a thriving development about 35 miles west of D.C. where the Redskins train and hold public practices. The city's new team would remain in the heart of Washington, playing its games just blocks from the Capitol Building. But still the sport remained a foreign entity. The Nationals ranked 11th in attendance in all of baseball for the team's inaugural year in the nation's capital, averaging 33,728 patrons a game. Over the next five seasons, the Nationals would never rank higher than 19th, usually finishing in the league's bottom six. It seemed as if too much time had elapsed since baseball was relevant in the city where the Senators last won a World Series in 1924. By now the sport was nothing more than a fleeting attraction.

Plus the Nationals were an utterly hapless ballclub. The team finished .500 or worse in each of its first five seasons since relocating. Their best statistical finish was in 2005 when they finished 81-81 but still finished dead last in the highly competitive National League East division. In 2008

and 2009, the Nationals finished with an astoundingly scarce winning percentage and ended the year 32.5 and 34 games out of first place respectively.

“They were just flat-out bad,” said Steve Czaban, co-host of the popular *Sports Reporters* radio show in Washington. “But when you finish last, or close to it every year, you get high draft picks and obviously that helped a lot. Well, with Strasburg, it practically changed the face of the franchise.”

On June 9, 2009, the Washington Nationals selected 20-year-old pitcher Stephen Strasburg with the number-one overall pick in Major League Baseball’s annual amateur draft. ESPN’s baseball analyst Jerry Crasnick called the pitcher the “most-hyped pick in draft history,” even greater than other notable number-ones like Ken Griffey Jr., Chipper Jones, and Alex Rodriguez. A little more than two months later the team rewarded him with the highest-salary rookie contract in the history of baseball - \$15.1 million, breaking the previous record of \$10.5 million signed in 2001 by the Chicago Cubs pitching prospect, Mark Prior, another can’t miss prospect out of San Diego. To say the Nationals’ expectations were high would be a severe understatement.

“I think everybody in the organization knew we were dealing with a very special talent,” said the team’s manager, Jim Riggleman, from his office at Nationals Park. “Nobody was prepared to let an opportunity like this walk away from us. Stephen is a once-in-a-lifetime type player.”

Born in 1988 to Jim Strasburg and Kathleen Swett, his parents had met while attending San Diego State. The two settled down in the San Diego suburbs to start a family, Jim starting a career as a real estate developer, Kathleen as a dietician. Neither parent played sports competitively beyond high school but encouraged Stephen to get involved in whatever interested him and he immediately showed promise as a young baseball star. Unfortunately, he also developed an intensity that would lead to tantrums on the mound. It was an odd habit, one you wouldn't assume meeting the young man away from the diamond. He was a fairly shy kid and a very good student – sort of a momma's boy. He never acted out in the classroom or towards his family. Instead, his outbursts were exclusive to the mound.

It is a hot Monday night in May in El Cajon, California. Junior pitcher Stephen Strasburg is on the mound for the West Hills Wolf Pack. The pitcher is cruising comfortably against a heavily favored team from Grossmont High. Unfortunately, a stalled Wolf Pack offense has kept the game tied at 0-0. With a runner on first, a routine double-play groundball is muffed in the bottom of the fifth by shortstop Blaine Hoffard, only a sophomore. Strasburg gets heated, his face turns beet red and he fires off rounds of expletives into his glove. He is rattled, unable to shrug off the blunder that just happened behind him. Taunts and heckles are shouted from the Grossmont dugout. Unnerved, Strasburg serves up a meatball to the next batter, a base-clearing double that is crushed to the gap in left-center field. He turns and screams at his shortstop, self-implosion.

Because of his temper and unimpressive physical condition – he was hefty as a child – Strasburg received minimal attention coming out of high school. As a junior at West Hills, he went 1-10, his lone victory coming against a team that set a state record for consecutive losses. Calling Strasburg an unknown would be polite.

But one game changed everything. His senior season against rival El Capitan for first place in the Grossmont League, Strasburg pitched a 12-strikeout shutout, a performance his coach Scott Hopgood called “the greatest high school game I’ve ever seen.” El Cap was a fastball hitting team so Strasburg kept its batters off-balance, throwing primarily curveballs and change-ups for strikes. He finished his senior season with a 1.68 earned run average and struck out 74 batters in just 62.1 innings. His ERA and shutout total set school records and he was named West Hills 2006 Scholar-Athlete of the Year.

Still, his fastball wasn’t yet jaw-dropping in velocity – peaking in the high 80s – and his attitude on the field was still a concern for some ballclubs. He was a soft 255 pounds as a senior and lacked the conditioning to make him a pro ballplayer. “I told scouts not to draft me,” he once told *Sports Illustrated*. “I wasn’t ready.”

So Strasburg wasn’t drafted out of high school like most major prospects and schools were more interested in him for his academic accomplishments than just his pitching ability. He graduated from West Hills with a 4.65 grade-point average, bolstered by excellent grades in numerous Advanced Placement classes. He was recruited heavily by Ivy League schools like Yale and Harvard but Strasburg had his heart set on Stanford University – great school, close to home, outstanding baseball team. Stanford flirted with the pitching prospect but never offered a scholarship. He wouldn’t be a Cardinal. He was devastated.

Wanting to remain local but without many options, Strasburg was recruited heavily by his parent’s alma-mater, San Diego State. The school hired San Diego Padres’ legend Tony Gwynn as manager in 2002, just after the Hall-of-Famer retired from a 20-year career in the Majors. Before that, Gwynn had been an All-American with the Aztecs as a collegiate player. Having a local hero

like Gwynn recruit him meant a lot to the young pitcher. “Growing up, I was a huge Tony Gwynn fan. I read all of his hitting books and everything!” Strasburg once told MLB.com. He committed to play for the Aztecs.

“When we recruited him out of high school, ‘Stras’ wasn’t that impressive,” Gwynn told *The Syracuse Post-Standard* (after college, Strasburg played for the National’s affiliate, Syracuse Chiefs).

“And I remember Rusty being in my ear, saying, ‘I’m telling you, Stephen Strasburg is going to be great.’...I’d turn to Rusty and I say, ‘Are you sure you know what you’re talking about?’”

Rusty Filter was the team’s pitching coach of 16 years. He had 52 San Diego State pitchers drafted and signed by professional clubs, although none would make a serious impact in the Majors. Filter was the one who persuaded Gwynn to take the gamble on the young hothead, the immature fat kid prone to yelling at teammates and umpires from the hill. It was now Filter’s responsibility to rein in the young pitcher, his reputation depended on it. His first order of business: demanding Strasburg meet with Dave Ohton, SDSU’s strength and conditioning coach.

"When I saw this guy, and saw how out-of-shape and how unmotivated he was, I thought someone was playing a joke," Ohton told *USA Today*. "This guy was throwing up every day we trained. I thought he had a medical condition, it was that bad. I finally told him, 'You need to consider quitting. You're wasting your time.'"

He clearly had a long way to go. Strasburg entered college 30 pounds overweight and Ohton nicknamed him “Slothburg.” He was soft physically and mentally and Coach Filter tried to gauge the pitcher’s stability.

"I told him exactly what people thought of him," Filter said. "He stared at me, nodding. He definitely thought about quitting."

Through rigorous workouts and a new dietary regimen thanks to Mom (the dietician taught her son how to make healthy homemade burritos), the pitcher was able to shrink his frame without distorting his throwing motion. "People doubted me," Strasburg told *USA Today*. "People questioned my make-up. And I understand why they did."

He was 6-foot-3, 255 when he started at San Diego State. Two months later he stood 6-5 and weighed a slender 220. As an added bonus, the additional strength training helped him increase the velocity on his fastball nearly 10 miles per hour. "He was around 90 in high school, which is not really out-of-the-ordinary," said Filter. "And pitchers will usually gain 3-4 miles an hour. But you never see it go from 89-90 to 99-101. That's unheard of."

In his sophomore season with the Aztecs, Strasburg simply overmatched the competition. He went 8-3 and posted a 1.57 earned-run average. Collegiate batters couldn't keep up with his improved fastball and his dominant off-speed pitches made opponents look silly. That summer he pitched for the collegiate national team during the Haarlem Baseball tournament in the Netherlands and the FISU World Collegiate Championships in the Czech Republic. In seven appearances in these tournaments, Strasburg went 4-0 with a 0.88 ERA. His phenomenal performance in these international outings earned the pitcher a birth on the U.S. national team at the 2008 Summer Olympics. He was the only college player selected. He started two games for the Americans in

Beijing, including a win over the Netherlands in a game in which he allowed just one hit over seven innings while striking out 11. His stock was on the rise and scouts were taking notice.

Selected as a pre-season All-American by the National Collegiate Baseball Writers Association after his stellar 2008 season, his 2009 campaign was even more dominant. Strasburg continued to subdue opposing batters with a dizzying array of pitches. His fastball consistently touched 100 mph on the radar gun (103 was his fastest recorded), while his change-up reached ninety and his sinker would drop nearly six inches relative to the placement of his fastballs. By season's end, Strasburg was 13-1, had a miniscule 1.32 ERA, and had struck out 195 batters. To top off a season of supremacy, he threw a no-hitter in his season finale against Air Force. The hyperbole began.

The young pitcher could throw triple-digit fastballs and possessed masterful control and the ability to pinpoint an exact location. He was also equipped with devastating secondary pitches. Strasburg's extended arsenal contained a drastic curveball and change-up – a slower pitch, meant to confuse the batter – that was docked at 89 mph. “This guy, age twenty-whatever he is,” said veteran teammate Adam Dunn, “has three big league unbelievable pitches and that's what separates him from all the other guys who are coming up.”

Strasburg had solidified himself as baseball's top prospect and some even said he was the league's next Sandy Koufax or Nolan Ryan. But he was hesitant to embrace the initial hype and outpouring of attention. He was still a shy kid, just getting used to the fame of being a Big League prospect. But he also realized his growing responsibility to the media. So he did what he was asked – what was required of him but nothing more. He tried to limit the number of interviews he

allowed and avoided cameras when possible. But Strasburg-mania was already too magnified, his myth too swollen, to temper the press.

Before even being selected first-overall by the Nationals, Strasburg became a household name to baseball fans thanks to ESPN and just about every other major outlet. His future was dissected on a series of debate programs on ESPN such as “Outside the Lines,” “Pardon the Interruption,” and “Rome is Burning.” He also was the focus of an extensive feature on HBO’s “Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel.” He was becoming a full-fledged star before even throwing a single major league pitch.

"It's hard to compare these things," baseball documentarian Ken Burns told *The Washington Post*. "But I can't imagine with this kind of saturation that takes place today that there's anybody who's a casual baseball fan who doesn't have a lot of expectations for Stephen Strasburg."

He was a modern-day Roy Hobbs with much of the same adulation and fascination. In Bernard Malamud’s 1952 novel The Natural, Hobbs is a 19-year-old pitching prodigy, all set for a tryout with the Chicago Cubs. His pitching prowess is legendary and a larger-than-life myth is created around his achievements. This was Strasburg’s new life. Much of the country had never seen him pitch, playing way out on the West Coast for a small school. But he was still wildly reported about, though rarely seen. Accounts of his 103 mph fastball or his 23-strikeout game spread wildly, despite the East Coast biased media. The assistance of 21st Century technology only enhanced the Strasburg myth. Youtube videos and Facebook pages helped to further promote the brand. Clips of him retiring batters with unholy heaters soared in popularity on Youtube, some videos reaching nearly 1,000,000 views. Strasburg-mania was reaching unprecedented new heights.

The whirlwind of stardom – the television interviews, the cover stories on *Sports Illustrated* and *Beckett's Baseball* magazine, the Internet fame, the hoards of autograph seekers – started to slowly affect Strasburg. “I think he knew there would be a lot of media surrounding him and he was okay with that,” said Filter. “But I think he just grew a little tired of it all, like he just wanted to play ball.” But interest in the kid didn’t wane following the draft. In August, 2009, Strasburg made his first trip to the Nationals spring training facility in Viera, Florida. Finally, he’d be able to just play ball. As he approached Space Coast Stadium, past the replica space shuttle out front and along the long sidewalk leading to the gaudy ballpark that looks like it was designed for Universal Studios, he noticed a sea of scoop-hungry journalists huddled out front. Some of the reporters he recognized, some he was seeing for the first time. It was hard to tell the bodies apart there were so many, recorders cocked and ready to go, eager for the pitcher’s first words.

Strasburg was surprised and put-off by it all. He was supposed to undergo simple, initial instructional workouts with coaches and team officials. He was hoping to meet some of his new teammates, joke around with the guys. He had missed the camaraderie of a dugout. He wanted to be a normal player. He thought he’d be able to hide. Instead he was met by an onslaught of jittery writers burdened by an impending deadline. As the attention grew, Strasburg became more and more withdrawn, keeping everything at an arm’s length.

An arm worth \$15.1 million.

July 27, 2010: Clubhouse, Nationals Park – 4:30 p.m.

Strasburg's refined frame is gangly – all legs and arms. He's wearing his home uniform, white pants with a red-stripe down each leg, and a standard-issued Washington Nationals gray, Nike undershirt. The undershirt, worn by most of the Nationals in the clubhouse, pulls and stretches to accommodate the players' chest and bicep muscles, but hangs relatively loose on Strasburg. He stands and stretches, raising both hands above his head and reaches toward the clubhouse ceiling – from toe-to-fingertip he's almost eight feet tall. He grabs a bat leaning on a nearby chair and takes practice cuts in front of his locker. His practice swing is dramatically slow and stops at hip level, only occasionally following through fully – the type of pantomime swing that longtime Cincinnati Red and New York Yankee Paul O'Neil used to rile opposing crowds in the outfield between innings.

Just moments later, first-year shortstop Ian Desmond, notices the rookie pitcher working on his swing and seizes the opportunity to get some laughs at the superstar's expense. With a bat in his left hand, Desmond slinks over to the back of the Nationals clubhouse, an area reserved for the team's veterans and where the lockers of first-baseman Adam Dunn, third-baseman Ryan Zimmerman, and catcher Ivan "Pudge" Rodríguez all align. The young infielder points a thumb in Strasburg's direction and then outwardly mocks the pitcher's batting stance and swing. Desmond's impersonation is wildly exaggerated to include an awkwardly raised bat, wobbly knees, and loose elbows that collapse into his chest. Of all the people watching Desmond's performance – and Strasburg isn't one of them – Desmond is clearly the most entertained. Although he only garners a few snickers from Dunn and indifferent applause from Pudge, Desmond laughs uproariously when he's finished. Strasburg continues to work quietly on his technique.

"Baseball," she says, using the word to sum up a hundred happy abstractions, themes that flare to life in the crowd shout and diamond symmetry, in the details of a dusty slide. The word has resonance if you're American, a sense of shared heart and

untranslatable lore. But she only means to suggest the democratic clamour, a history of sweat and play on sun-dazed afternoons, an openness of form that makes the game a kind of welcome-to-my-country.”

– Don DeLillo, *At Yankee Stadium*

Baseball is deep-seeded in America’s view of itself. As essayist and critic Gerald Early once said, "I think there are only three things America will be known for 2,000 years from now when they study this civilization: the Constitution, jazz music, and baseball." The game’s icons are often elevated to a status that transcends sport, approaching near sainthood. It is a platform for men to be great despite stepping to the plate and failing two-thirds of the time. Those capable few that excel are not merely celebrated and rewarded but cherished and immortalized.

Even the notion of the “ball park” conjures illusions of wonder and innocence – peanuts, Cracker-Jacks, and rooting for the home team. The ballpark once was the “Stonehenge of America” – a place of marvel and allure. It’s men playing a children’s game. It’s The Babe, The Say Hey Kid, and Hammerin’ Hank. It’s iron man Lou Gehrig succumbing to a disease, literally dying on his feet, and still summoning the strength to tell a crowd at Yankee Stadium that he once played baseball and for that considered himself “the luckiest man on the face of the earth.” It’s Abbot & Costello introducing some patter – *Who’s on first?* – that would enter everyday discourse. It’s baseball. And it’s sacred to us.

Or so the story goes.

Whether perceived or genuine, baseball has always been at the core of the American character. Yet the truth is that by the late 20th and early 21st Century, baseball had lost its splendor. What the “Greatest Generation” perfected, the “Boomers” and “Generation X” had sullied and

almost destroyed. Not to say that baseball wasn't still a popular sport, but significant allegations and blemishes tarnished some of its majesty. The player's strike of 1994 canceled baseball halfway through the season, marking the first time the country went without a World Series since 1904. The great home-run race of 1998 and Barry Bonds' subsequent destruction of Hank Aaron's long-standing home-run record has since been considered fallacious and misleading considering the slugger's nefarious involvement with banned performance-enhancing drugs. A few years before Strasburg was even drafted, baseball had already been to hell and back – or at least Congress and back. Star players, including pitching greats Roger Clemens, Andy Pettite and Curt Schilling, along with home run hitters Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa, and Bonds, were all summoned to testify before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. The topic for discussion: the use of illegal steroids in baseball.

The use of steroids and human growth hormone was so rampant in the 1990s and early 2000s that it seems as if everyone – fans included – just turned a blind eye while the sport's most heralded records got obliterated and the game disparaged. In a 2005 survey of 568 players, conducted by *USA Today*, 79 percent of players said they “believed steroids played some role in record-breaking performances by high-profile players.” Another 27 percent added that performance-enhancing drugs were a “major contributor,” to the historical achievements.

Generations from now, fans will look back in astonishment at the atrocities committed during the steroids-era in baseball and wonder how such feats went unchecked. After all, nothing says “historic legacy” than a big, fat asterisk and footnote in the record books – an actual proposed solution to the whole mess. When the scandal broke in the early 2000s, fans felt naïve, belittled and betrayed. Consequently, those in charge of the game – the Commissioner, the owners, the players,

et al. – looked corrupt, condescending and downright criminal. In fact, several players would later face criminal charges for perjury and other offenses related to their own connection with the illegal drugs.

In March, 2006, the book *Game of Shadows* delved into the dealings of many ball players with the Bay Area Laboratory Co-op – the notorious BALCO. Writers Lance Williams and Mark Fainaru-Wada, expanded their initial reports from the *San Francisco Chronicle* and featured countless stories about players, specialized trainers and syringes. The book exposed stars like Gary Sheffield, former MVP Jason Giambi, and Bonds, baseball's new all-time home run king:

The drugs could quicken recovery after workouts, build stamina, add muscle. They could eliminate that slump in August, when the minor injuries and fatigue of the long season would otherwise wear a ballplayer down. Beyond that, for a player with the natural ability of Bonds, the sky was the limit as far as what the drugs might do. The Weight Guru told Bonds all of this, and Bonds decided to go for it.

The reporters pieced together the massive steroid conspiracy involving 'undetectable' designer drugs, sophisticated training programs, and the supplement industry. BALCO and its founder, Victor Conte, became just as synonymous with baseball as a 6-4-3 double-play.

Regardless of leaked court testimonies, tell-all books by former players, or Congressional questioning, baseball was scarred and the fans were fed up. Bernie Miklasz, the longtime sports writer for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, published a book in 2008 featuring all of his best columns including his piece on the McGwire versus Sosa homerun chase of 1998 – specifically the wonderful night in September when McGwire broke Roger Maris' single-season home run record. In his book, he prefaces the popular piece by admitting he felt the temptation to “bury this event and pretend it never happened.” An entire generation felt deceived and disenchanted, wishing it had never happened. It became impossible to mention the sport without discussing its association with

steroids. It was, for millions of fans, heart-wrenching. Fans like Will Leitch, founder of the popular sports blog “Deadspin” and current sports editor of *New York* magazine, wrote a baseball tome that symbolized the despair:

This is a book about baseball, so I suppose there has to be a mention of performance-enhancing drugs. I don’t like it, you don’t like it...but there it is, regardless: I can’t ignore the pretend elephant in the pretend room. I trudge onward, battered, defeated, but hopeful that someday, maybe my children, maybe my grandchildren, will be able to write books about baseball without having to mention steroids. We can only hope to leave the earth in better condition than when we found it.

Spoken like a typical baseball fan – eternally hopeful.

As the first decade of the new century came to an end, Major League Baseball desperately needed a crop of young superstars to emerge and restore its reputation from the previous generation’s transgressions – and Strasburg was an ideal candidate to help spearhead this movement. Baseball needed a savior (or several) and no player was in better position to make a lasting impression than the man nicknamed “Jeezus” by his teammates (awarded not for any Christ-like attributes but for what opposing batters would mutter while walking back to the dugout following another strikeout).

"What we have is a game that's so central to our existence that whether we know it or not, it seeps in," Burns said to *The Post*. "And one of the great questions now is how is Strasburg going to do...What does he bring to the Nationals, and the fan base, and the sense of pride of baseball in the capital city?"

Before even his first big-league start, Strasburg appeared on national television pitching for the Harrisonburg Senators, the Nationals’ Double-A affiliate. Needless to say, the Senators did not usually receive national attention.

“We were talking about baseball for once,” said D.C. sports radio host Steve Czaban. “Every day it was ‘how he’s doing?’ ‘When’s he getting called up?’ And that lasted all summer! We were talking baseball every day in D.C. because of him and people were really excited.”

On May 4, Strasburg was promoted to the Nationals’ Triple-A team, the Syracuse Chiefs. His debut for the Chiefs had the highest attendance in the 135-year history of the minor league team. He pitched six scoreless innings in his first game, including six strikeouts while only allowing one hit and one base on balls. In his second start in Syracuse, he pitched six innings of no-hit baseball before being removed. He finished his minor league career with an overall record of 7–2, and an ERA of 1.30 to go along with sixty-five strikeouts and thirteen walks in 55⅓ innings of play. He was officially ready for the big show and the looming opportunity to supplant the disgraced heroes that came before him. Strasburg’s own legend, already burdensome, would be validated by success on the mound. He would replace the icons of the previous generation.

This was Roy Hobbs striking out the Babe Ruthian character, Walter “The Hammer” Whambold while en route to his tryout with Chicago. A final third swing and miss by the Hammer cemented the legacy and perpetuated the myth of Roy Hobbs, the prodigy surpassing the legend. Out-with-the-old, in-with-the-new.

July 27, 2010: Home Dugout, Nationals Park – 5:00 p.m.

Strasburg walks down a long cinder block hallway from the clubhouse to the team's dugout. Fans are sauntering to their seats with still about an hour before the scheduled first pitch. The pregame excitement and chaos has transferred itself to field level, where players take batting practice, play long toss and crack jokes while members of the media frantically swarm like fire ants.

As he climbs the dugout steps he squints at the severe sunlight, contorting his narrow face. It's 97 degrees and the sun sits high in left field, rendering his hat's red brim useless. He emerges from the dugout, giving tonight's crowd its first glimpse of the reason they bought a ticket. Those early in attendance erupt. "There here is!" shouts a young, eager child from just a few rows above the dugout.

Strasburg is unchanged by the outpouring of affection. He lowers his head and jogs slowly into the ocean of outfield, receiving a standing ovation from the home crowd.

"When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

– Maxwell Scott, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*

The pulsating, rhythmic cadence of The White Stripes song *Seven Nation Army* bellowed throughout Nationals Park. In mere moments the 40,315 in attendance would catch their first glimpse of the fabled phenom – and in a matter of hours they'd all be a part of baseball lore.

The sellout crowd that gathered was greater than any other in the young stadium's two-year history since its Opening Day in 2008. The stadium was tucked in southeast D.C.. To get there, the

majority of fans traveled by Metro, all crammed tightly on the green line to the Navy Yard station and walking the remaining four blocks. During almost any other Nationals game of the season, fans would meander over from the Metro stop well into the third and even fourth innings. No one was ever in a hurry to watch a baseball team that had finished under .500 in each of its last 5 seasons. But this night would be different.

By the time they had found their seats most fans were already sweating, suffering from the tremendous heat wave that tortured the city all summer. Although early June would just be the start of insufferable temperatures, D.C. would endure its hottest meteorological summer (June – August) ever on record. Not necessarily enjoyable baseball weather. It was not much cooler inside the air-conditioned press box either. Nearly 300 writers, television and radio personalities converged on the Shirley Povich Media Center – the two-level press box looming high over home plate. The inside of the press box, adorned with loving photos of its namesake, the cherished *Washington Post* columnist, was also filled to capacity. It was standing-room only everywhere at Nationals Park.

As the ululate wail of Jack White's guitar echoed off the nearby Anacostia River, the tall Californian emerged from the home team's right field bullpen. The ball park exploded.

Strasburg took the mound for the Washington Nationals for the first time in a game that matched two of the worst teams in the National League, if not all of baseball. As Paul Daugherty of *Sports Illustrated* would note, Strasburg made "his major league debut against the Pittsburgh Pirates, who are major league by association only." Yet the MLB Network was on hand. The premium television networked covered the game like it was the World Series. Analysts on the field before the game anxiously covered EVERYTHING that Strasburg did: *He just took a sip of Gatorade!*

MLB Network's coverage started 2 hours before opening pitch with interviews, collegiate highlights, and effusive gushing. The network also assigned its top crew, featuring Bob Costas, Jim Kaat and John Smoltz to be on hand to witness the start and fawn over the superstar-in-the-making.

The sell-out crowd that packed Nationals Park was there solely to watch him pitch. In fact, on June 8th against the Pirates, the recorded attendance was 40,315. On June 9th and 10th against the very same lowly Pirates team, games started by pitchers John Lannan and Livan Hernandez respectively, only garnered attendances of 18,876 and 21,767. Baseball fans had been waiting for this start since Strasburg became the first overall pick in the 2009. And with the U.S. Capitol building in plain sight down the street from left field, the young hurler performed the most rousing and dominating debut in baseball history.

Strasburg surrendered only two runs on four hits over seven innings, while striking-out 14 batters, including the final seven he faced. Batters would twist and flail, waving their bats awkwardly in luckless attempts to make contact. Or the smart ones, the batters looking to get bailed out by an umpire rather than risk national embarrassment, would stand still, completely frozen by what the pitcher offered. Afraid to swing, a batter would undoubtedly be rung up on three perfectly placed darts.

Throughout the night, the ecstatic feeling in the stadium built and built as high-fives and hugs were shared by strangers after each strikeout. In his seven innings of work, Strasburg did not

issue a walk to a single batter to become just the sixth pitcher since 1900 to strike out as many as 14 without issuing a free base. This was greatness incarnate – a magical and indelible sports moment.

“He consistently throws strikes, he’s always over the plate,” said Hall-of-Fame catcher to-be, Rodriguez. “Most young guys don’t do that, they get behind too much and then they get in trouble...With him, it’s always strikes. Just nobody can hit it!”

“He’s the only guy I know,” added teammate Drew Storen, “who always lives up to the hype.”

For his next outing in Cleveland, Strasburg struck-out eight more in a 9-4 win over the Indians, breaking the total strikeout record for first two games in Major League history. The legend Bob Feller had 20 strikeouts in his first two starts for the 1936 Indians, and Don Ferrarese had 21 in his first two starts for the 1956 Orioles, but both stars had pitched in relief beforehand. This was a whole new beast.

The Atlanta-based television network, TBS, opted to make Strasburg’s second start its weekly national broadcast, electing to bump its scheduled Sunday meeting between the Boston Red Sox and Philadelphia Phillies, probably two of the three most popular teams in all of baseball. MLB Network also aired his second start. They then also reran the innings he pitched in full during its nightly program, “MLB Tonight,” making sure to milk every bit of Strasburg as possible.

Even more importantly, in the 12 hours following his debut game, the Indians, a team ranked last in the American League in attendance, sold 4,000 additional tickets to the contest on Sunday, the one in which Strasburg was scheduled to start. The final attendance for that game – 32,876 – was by far Cleveland’s highest total since its home opener. In the following few weeks,

Strasburg's brand would extend even further with a guest appearance reading the "Top 10 Little Known Facts About Stephen Strasburg" list on the "Late Show with David Letterman" (#1: "If I would have known I'd be on Letterman, I wouldn't have pitched so well!"), a *Sports Illustrated* cover story and a hilarious lampooning at the hands of *The Onion*, a faux-newspaper with national circulation which reported that the rookie had begun hazing Nationals veterans. Even the small Virginia suburb of Strasburg moved to formally change its name to "Stephen Strasburg" as a sign of reverence and appreciation (the resolution was later rejected by town officials).

"I haven't been to D.C. in nearly thirty years," said Thomas Dougherty, a septuagenarian from a Chicago suburb riding the orange line Metro to the Smithsonian Museum. "We planned this trip for our anniversary back in December and we're lucky enough to be going to the game this Friday...and now Strasburg is supposed to start...I couldn't be happier!"

"We're both die-hard White Sox fans," his wife Cheryl interrupted, "but we know we'll be in Strasburg's house! We'll pay our respects and be quiet." As she spoke, she began bowing with her delicate arms above her head.

Strasburg-mania was in full stride and the numbers supported the pandemonium. Each start was extremely lucrative for everyone involved. His debut performance on MASN, Washington's regional TV network, earned a 7.1 Nielsen rating in the city's market, easily topping the best-rated Nationals game in the station's history. Ticket sales for his starts also went up exponentially:

Table 1: Attendance Records for Home Starts

Strasburg's Home Start & Opponents	Attendance	Next Home Game (Starting Pitcher)	Attendance
Tues., June 8 – Pittsburgh Pirates	40,315	Wed., June 9 – Pirates (John Lannan)	18,876
Fri., June 18 – Chicago White Sox	40,325	Sat., June 19 – W. Sox (J.D. Martin)	36,487
Wed., June 23 – Kansas City Royals	31,913	Thur., July 1 – Mets (Livan Hernandez)	20,167
Sat., July 3 – New York Mets	39,214	Sun., July 4 – Mets (Craig Stammen)	29,234
Fri., July 9 – San Francisco Giants	34,723	Sat., July 10 – Giants (Craig Stammen)	23,977
Tues., July 27 – Atlanta Braves	40,043	Wed., July 28 – Braves (Livan Hernandez)	24,263
Tues., August 10 – Florida Marlins	25,939	Wed., Aug. 11 – Marl. (Scott Olsen)	15,061
Sun., August 15 – Ariz. Diamondbacks	21,695	Mon., Aug. 23 – Cubs (Livan Hernandez)	17,921

Table 2: Attendance Records for Road Starts

Opposing Team	Average Home Attendance	Strasburg Start	Game Attendance
Cleveland Indians	17,435	Sun., June 13	32,876
Atlanta Braves	30,989	Mon., June 28	42,889
Florida Marlins	18,593	Fri., July 16	27,937
Cincinnati Reds	25,438	Wed., July 21	37,868
Philadelphia Phillies	45,027	Sat., August 21	45,266

“Everyone comes out to see him and rightfully so,” said first baseman Adam Dunn. “I mean, he’s one of the great talents in the game.”

FanSnap, a website that summarizes market trends for sporting events, claimed Strasburg was the biggest mover of ticket prices in baseball and even accounted for as high as 163-percent increases in single game tickets for night’s he started. Strasburg’s jersey was the best-selling MLB model in June of 2010. More than 78,000 Strasburg jerseys were sold through July 1, making his the top-selling Nationals jersey of all-time (in only one month on the market). A Topps/Bowman trading card of Strasburg sold on eBay for \$16,043 in June. Just a few weeks later, an autographed card – the only copy made and signed with a red border color – sold on the popular auction site for over \$100,000.

But, still, some people watched the zooming popularity with wariness. They believed the immense attention was overblown and even detrimental to the young star. “They just needed to let him go pitch,” former can’t-miss prospect Mark Prior told *XX Radio* in San Diego. Prior should have known, since he was the previous recipient of the largest rookie contract ever awarded. In 2001 the Cubs gave \$10.1 million to the a number-two overall pick out of the University of Southern California by way of San Diego. He too was labeled the next great pitching prodigy. “That’s a lot of pressure on anybody, whether you are 22, 23 years old or whether you are 35, 36. To have that kind of scrutiny day in and day out where you are expected to go out and almost throw a no hitter is just unrealistic basically.” Prior’s career would fade following the 2003 season, beleaguered by injuries on-and-off for the next 8 years.

Despite being the media’s newest darling – appearing on nearly every addition of ESPN’s “Baseball Tonight,” multiple front-page stories in *The Washington Post*, and gracing the cover of

nearly every major sports magazine – Strasburg was simply an athlete with superior skills – and thus a delight to watch pitch. Apart from the business aspects of his success, Strasburg’s performance on the mound could convert even the most jaded baseball fan. “To his fans, coaches, teammates and especially strikeout victims, Strasburg’s talents seems inexplicable, a supernatural force,” wrote *The Washington Post* in July. He reached the century mark on the radar gun several times in his first few games as a big leaguer, including a blistering third strike with a 1-2 count, that Indians outfielder Trevor Crowe could only admire, frozen by what he couldn’t see. The first-year right-fielder returned to his dugout, shaking his lowered head, his eyes open and glazed as if he’d seen a ghost, muttering constantly like a crazy person. Clearly the 26-year-old Crowe had not seen anything like a Strasburg fastball during his short time in the majors.

But the Nationals were going to shelter their young investment. Afraid of blowing out his arm, or simply tiring their new ace too soon, the organization set an innings limit for Strasburg. Strasburg would pitch no more than 160 innings on the year (including his work in the minors) and would never pitch beyond the seventh inning of any game. He would also be allowed all of the rest and recovery time he needed. The Nationals were prepared to coddle their young stud. Keeping Strasburg healthy and pitching meant that fans would continue to show up in record droves – and everyone would benefit.

Around the D.C. Metropolitan area – from Arlington to Bethesda – friends and strangers began greeting one another with wishes of a “Merry Strasmas” for each of his starts and he’d continue to prove his merit on the mound, impressing even the most weathered baseball lifer. “I’ve never seen a first year player with the maturity and the pitches and the control that he has,” said legendary manager, Bobby Cox. Cox knows something about pitchers, having managed what is

arguably the greatest rotation of all time – the 1995 Atlanta Braves staff included Tom Glavine, Greg Maddux, John Smoltz, and Steve Avery. Still, Cox said, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone quite like *that*, his very first year. He’s a really special kid.”

“Washington’s going to have a very special pitcher for a long, long time,” added Atlanta’s General Manager, Frank Wren. “And he’s going to put people in the ballpark.”

July 27, 2010: Home Bullpen, Nationals Park – 5:20 p.m.

The baseball makes a loud whipping noise as it repeatedly crashes into the open mitt of backup catcher Carlos Maldonado. Fastball in – WHAP! Fastball in – WHAP!

Strasburg prepares for tonight’s contest with the Braves like he would any other game, going through a methodical pregame routine and warm-up session in the bullpen with his pitching coach Steve McCatty. McCatty, a former pitcher with the Oakland Athletics, is a weathered baseball addict with a doughy face and round nose. His cheeks are a rosy pink, skin clearly worn from years in the sun. The veteran pitching coach looks on from a distance, his large, red Nationals hat sits high on his head, tilted slightly to the left. He’s expressionless, watching with his arms folded across his jersey, tiny beads of sweating running down the side of his face. Fastball out – WHAP! Fastball out – WHAP!

The pitcher continues to throw, mixing in sliders and curveballs, executing each pitch without outwardly exerting any effort. Occasionally he steps off the rubber mound, lifts his cap and wipes his brow with the sleeve of his jersey. He’ll raise his hand up high and rotate at the shoulder, allowing his throwing arm to windmill around to get

loose. His body language is poor. He doesn't look comfortable. Although he is repeatedly delivering the baseball with visible ease, and throwing it faster than any driving speed limits, something is still not right. His muscles feel tight, his shoulder stiff.

McCatty saunters to his young star, with the slumped posture and slow stride that's seemingly only perfected through years on a baseball diamond. The two chat, the old man and his prodigy. Strasburg expresses his discomfort and McCatty listens, presumably anxious and fearful for his star's well-being. McCatty has been around baseball – and more specifically pitchers – for long enough to understand the frailty of young arms. He was part of the brain-trust, along with Manager Jim Rigglesman and General Manager Mike Rizzo, who elected to bring Strasburg along slowly and let him ease into the Major Leagues with extended rests and an innings-cap. Now, in the moments before only his ninth start as a big leaguer, the phenom is showing his first signs of mortality – a nagging stiffness in his right shoulder.

Strasburg finishes his warm-up while McCatty makes the long walk from the bullpen back to the clubhouse. He walks slowly, head-down. He makes his way down the steps into the dugout on a mission to find Lee Kuntz, the team's head athletic trainer.

"I can't remember this much excitement over such a young player starting out since Bob Feller began with Cleveland. Isn't the reaction over this kid something?"

– American League president Joe Cronin on David Clyde, 1973

Of course the flip side to our hero's mythological rise and the adulation he received, is the necessary doubt and skepticism that accompanies any success story. Every time the names of immortals like Nolan Ryan or Sandy Koufax were invoked, there were nods to the unremarkable careers of boy wonder David Clyde, Mark "The Bird" Fidrych, 20-strikeout king Kerry Wood, and of course, the Cubs' Mark Prior. Baseball has amassed an incalculable number of careers that "should have been" but "never were" and the fatality rate for pitching careers is far greater.

The unnatural twist and accelerated follow-through of a pitching delivery can distort and disfigure an elbow, often stretching tendons beyond their means and putting tremendous strain on a rotating shoulder. Throwing a baseball upwards of 90 mph is a very taxing activity of which very few are capable. An even smaller number of athletes can perform this grueling task on a daily basis and remain healthy for a full career. As Nationals beat reporter Adam Kilgore stated in *The Washington Post*, the team's "most valuable player relies on the most violent, unpredictable acts in sports."

David Clyde made his debut with the Texas Rangers in 1973. The 18-year-old kid had gone 18-0 as a senior in high school the year before and his jump to the majors was highly acclaimed and well-touted. He was selected the first overall pick in that year's draft and was given a \$125,000 signing bonus, the highest ever for a rookie at the time. On June 28, Clyde won his first big league start in front of the very first sellout crowd in the history of Arlington Stadium.

After his initial flourish, Clyde's star quickly faded. He was textbook mediocre in '74 and pitched in only one game of the 1975 season before injuring his arm and being demoted to the minors. He bounced in and out of the majors for five more seasons, never earning an ERA less than 4.28. Injuries and ineffectiveness derailed his career and he was released before the 1980

season. So much for boy wonder. And since his early exit from baseball, Clyde's story has become sort of a living warning for grooming young pitchers. Clyde has always claimed that he was brought up prematurely and blames the quick promotion on his shoulder issues. His pitching arm was too young for the intense work load. He said in 2003, while operating a baseball academy out of Houston, "If nothing else came out of my career, the things I hear periodically are, 'We're not gonna do what we did to that young man, what we did to David Clyde.'" Let's see if any team would listen.

Fidrych and Wood were other flashes in the baseball pan – glimpses of greatness later erased by years of disappointment and regret. In 1976, Fidrych finished with a 19-9 record and won the American League Rookie of the Year Award while pitching for the Detroit Tigers. Fidrych was a national treasure, more recognizable than most politicians, movie stars and musicians. He stood 6'3" and had an enormous white-man's afro of curly blonde locks. His distinctive hair looked like it was trying to escape out of the sides of his Tigers capped when pulled down low on his head. He appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* next to the *Sesame Street* character "Big Bird." He also became the first athlete ever to appear on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine. He was colorful, a character of American culture. But in 1977, while rehabbing a knee injury, Fidrych felt his arm just "go dead" (his words). He suffered a torn rotator cuff that wouldn't be diagnosed for year. He was out of baseball by 1981, retiring at the age of 29.

Wood was another pitching wunderkind. He made his debut for the Cubs in 1998 and in only his fifth start as a major leaguer Wood delivered what is considered by many to be the most dominating pitching performance in major league history. He threw a one-hit, no walk, 20-strikeout shutout against the Houston Astros, which tied Roger Clemens' record for strikeouts in a nine-inning game and broke Bill Gullickson's single-game rookie record of eighteen strikeouts. In his

next season, Wood suffered a significant tear in his ulnar collateral ligament, an injury that would require Tommy John surgery to repair. The reconstructive surgery, named for the Los Angeles Dodgers' pitcher who first received the work on his elbow in 1974, is considered one of the major advancements in sports medicine in the last quarter century but the injury has been the baseball equivalent of a champion filly breaking a leg on the racetrack. In his 13 middling seasons in the majors, Wood was placed on the disabled list 14 times.

But the name evoked most often when discussing Strasburg was Mark Prior, a "can't miss" prospect who suffered numerous injuries after only a couple promising seasons. However, the comparison could be a good thing if it's made to complement both players' array of dominating pitches and pinpoint control. "I think he's easily compared to Mark Prior," says teammate Adam Dunn. "Because he's got three really, really, really quality major league pitches where a lot of guys coming up will have one, maybe two. Prior was the same way." Seems reasonable. Yet the comparison is made most often as a forewarning of what could be when big league pressure and strain meets the vulnerability of a developing arm.

What connected the two pitchers was their "Inverted W" mechanics. Their deliveries were remarkably similar and that could be a bit disturbing. The "Inverted W" is the way the arms appear in the form of a W while addressing the plate prior to the release of a pitch. While this isn't necessarily an omen for failure, the delivery does add extra pressure on the elbow, shoulder, and most of the ligaments in between. This unique action forces the arm to take a longer path to the high-cocked position and creates a rushed delivery to the plate. Insider baseball talk aside, the issue is with the timing of the delivery and when the arm follows through. Basically, the higher the pitching elbow gets in the delivery, the greater the strain on the arm and shoulder. Unfortunately,

because of the timing distortion that the “Inverted W” delivery creates, the elbow gets unusually high.

Neither Rigglesman nor Rizzo ever expressed concern over Strasburg’s delivery. Besides, Prior was notoriously overworked as a young pitcher and his manager at the time, Dusty Baker, received heaps of criticism for relying too heavily on the young pitcher too soon into his career. In 2003, Prior averaged 113.4 pitches per start in the regular season and averaged 126 pitches per outing in the month of September alone. He averaged another 120 pitches a game during in the postseason. Critics condemned Baker for using Prior recklessly, sacrificing his health for the team and manager’s own success. Finger-pointing aside, Prior suffered his first major arm injury the following season and never pitched the same after that.

Baseball has had its share of careers derailed, especially of guys on the mound. We’ve been through this before as fans and it is nothing out of the ordinary. It is not uncommon for stars at this position to fade from the spotlight prematurely – but not Strasburg. This time things would be different.

Nothing bad ever happened to Roy Hobbs, right?

July 27, 2010: Nationals Park – 7:00 p.m.

The massive lights that align Nationals Park, high above the infield, are fully lit, beaming ineffectively as the sun won’t be down for another four innings at least. Towering over right field, the pristine, 101-foot high-definition

scoreboard beautifully displays the lineups of both teams on either side of a spinning graphic of the Washington Nationals' logo. The scoreboard also provides the evening's time – 6:58 – seven minutes 'til the opening pitch.

As the last stragglers of the sellout crowd continue to file in from Half Street, Jerome Hruska, the young "Voice of the Nationals," comes booming over the stadium's loud speakers.

"Right now..." Hruska says, delivering his signature welcoming call before going into the lineups of each team – Braves first, home team last.

Meanwhile, journeyman pitcher Miguel Batista trots from the dugout to the infield just as the crowd begins to absorb what has happened. Batista doesn't make it very far before a cavalcade of boos welcomes his arrival. He had been asked to replace Strasburg in the lineup only minutes prior.

"Can you be ready?" asks a concerned Rigglesman.

"Of course," the veteran answers, knowing full well that he would be blamed for the cancelation of "Strasmas."

"Annnd batting ninth, number forty-three...Miguel Batista!"

Even more boos - a lot more. Shouts of "Refund!" can be heard throughout the packed stadium. Batista's 10 warm-up tosses last all of three minutes before the first batter of the game, Atlanta's second baseman, Martin Prado steps to the plate. The boos never relent. Batista eventually gets the win, throwing 5 shutout innings and allowing only 3 hits. His performance appeases the restless crowd.

“Well I’m glad we got to see one great start out of him. That was one hell of a career he had.”

- Username: jpd0606, *ESPN.com* Message Board, 8/22/2010

Following his missed start against the Braves, Strasburg was placed on the 15-day disabled list for the first time in his career. Rizzo said it was because Strasburg had difficulty “getting loose,” though medically it was diagnosed as basic shoulder inflammation. Although the measures taken by the organization to protect its biggest investment were purely precautionary, many critics considered them a slight on Strasburg’s durability, a tiny chink in the armor. To some, missing a start because of trouble “getting loose” was insulting.

“Fans were thrown off by that,” says Steinberg. “I think they understood it was a precautionary measure, but something didn’t sit right.” And everyone in the city had an opinion, including some powerful politicians in Washington. “Five-hundred twenty starts, I never refused the ball,” Hall of Fame pitcher and U.S. Senator Jim Bunning told Politico in July following Strasburg’s first missed start. “What a joke!”

He returned to the lineup August 10 against the Florida Marlins only to have his worst performance of the year. He pitched only 4.1 innings and surrendered 6 earned runs, ballooning his ERA to just over 3 for the first time all season. His next outing was better but not spectacular. He went 5 innings in a no-decision against the Arizona Diamondbacks, giving up 3 runs but only 1 of which was earned. His record was now 5-3 and his ERA was once again below three, but he wasn’t blowing people away like before. He had already lost some of his luster and Strasburg-mania was slowly dissipating. He was still pinpointing his pitches well but his velocity wasn’t quite what it had been earlier in the year – he was now peaking around 96 mph – most likely due to general fatigue

and soreness. Not only that, but opposing teams simply had better scouting reports on him later on in the season – what he likes to throw, what he throws in certain situations and counts. Teams were more ready for him. Batters scoured game tapes for hints and tips in his mechanics. He wasn't striking out "everyone" anymore. The novelty had worn thin. The thrill was gone.

Then there was the cloudy Saturday night in Philadelphia and the final blow to a season that seemed almost inevitable.

In his third-game back from the DL, Strasburg took the hill against the defending National League Champion Phillies and he pitched great. Through four innings he had allowed just one run off two hits and he had recorded five strikeouts. The Nationals led 5-0 and Strasburg was in complete control.

He opened up the fifth frame with a strikeout of Raul Ibanez, who was caught looking. It was the pitcher's sixth K of the night. Next to the plate was right fielder Dominic Brown, a 6'5" behemoth batting seventh for the defending champs. Brown had been drafted by the Phillies in 2006 and was considered a promising prospect. Strasburg had already retired the young outfielder on a groundball to shortstop Ian Desmond to end the second inning. Now in the fifth, Strasburg delivered his third offering of the at-bat – a 1-1 changeup – but as he followed through to the plate he grimaced in obvious pain. In one flailing motion, Strasburg stepped off the mound, shook his right arm and grabbed at the elbow with his other hand – and officially ended the baseball resurgence in D.C.

The Nationals initially said Strasburg suffered a strained flexor tendon in the forearm but an MRI conducted the next day raised additional concerns over the gravity of the injury. The team decided on a second MRI that revealed a “significant tear” in his right elbow – in his ulnar collateral ligament, to be exact. Just like Kerry Wood and countless others before him, Strasburg would require Tommy John surgery, a procedure that requires 12-18 months of rehabilitation. When his 2010 season ended so abruptly, it effectively sunk his 2011 campaign too. Strasburg was 5-3 with a 2.91 ERA and had tallied 92 strikeouts in 68 innings with the Nationals.

And then – poof – it was over. There and gone. Just like a thunderbolt.

"It's a tough day for him and for all of us, for everyone who's a Nats fan," Team President Stan Kasten said after the extent of the injury was disclosed.

Riggleman called it a “freak accident.” The city was devastated.

“The player was developed and cared for in the correct way, and things like this happen,” Rizzo said, supporting his organization. “Pitchers break down, pitchers get hurt and we certainly are not second-guessing ourselves.” He sounded a bit too defensive.

As baseball analyst Tom Verducci pointed out, the list of contemporary players with the same mechanical glitch as Strasburg who later suffered traumatic injuries was rather substantial: “Kerry Wood (Tommy John), B.J. Ryan (Tommy John), Joel Zumaya (fractured elbow), Jeremy Bonderman (shoulder), Shaun Marcum (Tommy John), Anthony Reyes (Tommy John), Jake Peavy (torn back muscle), Jordan Zimmermann (Tommy John) and, most recently, Adam Wainwright (Tommy John).”

"It just happened," Strasburg said dryly when addressing the media following the diagnosis. "I can't really explain it and I'm not going to try to explain it anymore."

Strasburg went under the knife to reconstruct his throwing arm in Inglewood, California, on Friday, September 3. Dr. Lewis Yocum, the white-haired team physician of the Anaheim Angels and baseball-injuries expert, performed the procedure in which a piece of ligament was taken from the right-hander's left leg and transplanted into his pitching elbow. The incision was made along the medial side (inside) of his elbow joint. The damaged ulnar ligament was then replaced by a healthy tendon graft, harvested from the pitcher's hamstring. Dr. Yocum basically reconstructed Strasburg's precious elbow with pieces from his own leg – baseball's Frankensteinian operation. The procedure also yields an encouraging 85 percent success rate.

Strasburg started rehabilitation efforts the following Monday, at the Scripps Clinic in La Jolla, Calif., near his home in San Diego. His rehabilitation was quiet and he became impossible to contact. In his painful solitude Strasburg did not return many phone calls or any text messages from coaches and team physicians. He was simply gone. Meanwhile, D.C. was already at the acceptance stage of its grieving process. Which step of the grieving cycle is "switch from baseball to Redskins football?"

After the injury occurred, fans were rightfully distraught. Supporters of Washington D.C. sports were accustomed to heart break, well-versed in disappointment. They had a routine to settle their frustrations by now. They would bitch and bicker, assume the worst, and then move on, as jaded and cynical as ever. Self-pity doesn't last long in this town. The great and mythical Strasburg was already cast off.

“We can’t have anything good that lasts,” joked Steve Czaban. “Why should Strasburg have been any different?”

But things could always be worse. The mere mention of Tommy John surgery years ago meant a pitcher’s career was finished. Although the stigma of the procedure remains today, the prognosis is radically different. In fact, in contemporary baseball, a significant percentage of successful pitchers have undergone the procedure and returned as good as they were before the injury or even better. Nine pitchers selected for the 2010 All-Star Game had successfully undergone Tommy John surgery earlier in their careers. The 12-18 month rehabilitation process is grueling, but the success rate for pitchers returning to full strength is roughly 90 percent. Strasburg wasn’t dead, he was injured.

"Happens," Tampa Bay Rays manager Joe Maddon said when asked about Strasburg. "That's one part of the game, regardless of how much care you take...anything's possible when throwing a baseball. It's unfortunate...but he's going to be fine."

Yet hope was mostly ignored in Washington. Either the optimism didn’t register or it didn’t seem to matter. The city’s collective emotions evolved from initial awe to crestfallen indifference – all in a matter of three months. The Nationals were far too incompetent of a ball club without their star pitcher to hold the fans close to the game they had rediscovered. Without him, the Nationals were just a lousy team. Attendance collapsed. The team averaged a meager 18,620 a night in the remaining 23 home games following the injury despite home stands with big draw teams like the Phillies, Braves and Cardinals. The Nationals ended their 2010 campaign last in the division for the fourth straight year, finishing a dismal 28 games out of first place.

“The future ain’t what it used to be.”

- New York Yankees legend, Yogi Berra

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Pitchers and catchers of the Washington Nationals reported to Space Coast Stadium in Viera, Florida, on Wednesday, February 16, 2011. This first day of Spring Training is celebrated by baseball fans everywhere as the official start of spring, regardless of what the calendar says or the weather outside. The return of baseball has always conveyed a notion of hope. In March and April, every team still has a reason to be hopeful. This included the Nationals.

The Nationals had signed another number-one overall draft pick, “can’t-miss” outfielder Bryce Harper. The addition of Harper gave fans reason to feel excited all over again for a much ballyhooed top prospect (true fans have short memories). The team also signed a very expensive but proven veteran, outfielder Jayson Werth. The signing of Werth was the first major free agent pick-up in the team’s recent history and it also solidified the team’s lineup as a legitimate offensive threat.

Strasburg was there too, although certainly not under conditions he could have imagined. He was still a main attraction, surrounded by fans and media most everywhere he moved. His jersey, with the gold #37 printed on the back, was still the most popular at the ballpark. Thousands of little “Strasburgs” crammed into the bleachers.

The Nationals placed him on the 60-day disabled list to start the season due to the severity and recovery time of his injury but he was confident in the process. His surgery had been successful and he hoped to return to the pitching rotation by September of the current season, which seemed

like a long way off. In early March, Strasburg had advanced to throwing the baseball 90 feet on flat ground, not from a mound, slowly rebuilding his arm strength.

"My goal is to be the horse in this rotation," he said. "I want to go 200-plus innings every year, so it's something I'm working hard for. Physically, I feel I'm on the right track to get back."

So as the narrative moves forward, our hero's tale remains unresolved. Strasburg's legend grew so intensely over a few short months, that expectations grew unrealistic and he eventually faltered. After an initial hiccup, Strasburg suffered the worst possible fate for a pitcher, and the prodigy plummeted. All that's left is hope. If recent history has taught us anything, it's that Strasburg will return to glory and be dominant once again. But it's impossible to know for sure. Baseball can be fickle that way. Just ask Roy Hobbs.

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